



Coach Approach Ministries Podcast

Episode 81: Coach the Person, Not the Problem

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[Intro Music]

Brian: I’m Brian Miller, strategic director for Coach Approach Ministries, CAM for short, and I’m joined here today by the president of Coach Approach Ministries, is it now Dr. Chad Hall?

Chad Hall: I think it is, Brian. Good to see you today. How are you doing?

Brian: I’m doing really well. Looking forward to 2018 all the way through, my friend, all the way through. It’s going to be a good year.

Chad: I hope so.

Brian: Are you hearing that a lot? That people are saying 2018 is going to be a grand year?

Chad: You’re the first.

Brian: I do think so. I think it’s going to be good. I’m looking forward to it. Hey, our focus for January at Coach Approach Ministries is this idea of coaching the person, not the problem. Chad, since you introduced that idea with your e-book, we have heard so much feedback on coach the person, not the problem.

Chad: Yeah, it comes up in a lot of our mentor coaching sessions, our group mentor coaching cohort, classes that we teach. There’s something about that phrase, which is not a phrase I came up with, but it resonated with me, and it seems to resonate with a lot of other people too. It’s interesting, Brian. I think people instantly kind of get it and don’t. So, maybe that’s what we’re talking about today.

[Transcribed by Alyssa Miller](#)

Brian: That's exactly right. That's for me. It makes total sense, and I'm not sure exactly how to do it, but you didn't make up the phrase, "Coach the person, not the problem," trademark.

Chad: Right. I did trademark it. No, I didn't. I'm just kidding.

Brian: It's a good phrase, man, and I'm glad you shared it with us. So, let's start thinking through this coach the person, not the problem. One area, Chad, I think we've seen is that there's too much focus on "not the problem."

Chad: That's right. I was doing feedback, actually, a couple of times recently, and the coach that I was providing the mentor coaching for was really adamant, "I don't want to coach the problem. Don't coach the problem. Don't coach the problem," but they really kind of overdid it, and I'm hearing that more and more. It's a good thing that people want so badly to coach the person, but the not the problem piece probably gets over-exaggerated. So, when a client comes up with an issue, a topic, an opportunity, a challenge, whatever, the coach is hearing that as a problem, an issue you might say, and they're saying, "I don't want to pay any attention to that. I just want to pay attention to the person I'm coaching." The truth is, it's probably more like, "Coach the person, not so much their problem, or not just their problem." The truth is, people do need attention given to their problem. That's why they're coming up with coaching, or coming in to coaching. They want some solutions to things that they're facing, so we do need to give some attention to that in our coaching sessions.

Brian: If you don't hear the problem, it's going to communicate something to the client, I think. I had a client, it's been several years back who was a global traveler, and his topic for me that day was how to pack his bag for his next trip, and there was just something in me that thought this is too simplistic or something, but I thought to myself for sure I'm going to honor the fact that he brought that as his topic.

Chad: Right, and I think that's the thing. If we're not careful, we're kind of judgmental to say, "How to pack your suitcase? Come on."

Brian: "You've done this before."

Chad: "That's not going to make a bit of difference in anything," but when that's the thing that you're facing, when that's the problem, so to speak, that's important. There's really no trivial coaching topic, and the way I think about those kinds of topics is it's the topic that's the presenting issue. If we give enough time, enough attention, not only do we solve it, but we also get the opportunity to help the person grow, and change, and learn something new about him or herself, maybe have a shift of belief or attitude, or something like that. So, not only will we help that client come up with these external solutions to the problem of what to pack, but we could also help that client come up with some internal shifts about how to show up differently, and who knows, how to be more confident, focus on more the essentials. It's just amazing to me how little topics like that can often lead to really significant shifts in the client.

Brian: So, as you're talking about that, I just had this picture in my mind that the topic is the tip of the iceberg. It's what you see above the water, and there's a lot more under the water than you know, and you have to remember, you don't know what's under the water. So, it's your first clue that there's more under the water, and you want to honor that and to start to, I don't know if the word dig is right, but expose more of the problem with some awareness issues. Now, Chad, as you discern between the

problem and the person, I think the natural thing for everyone to do is to ask questions to tell us more about the problem.

Chad: Yeah, and I think you often start off there. That's a good place to start and explore. We use that hourglass model, and in that hourglass model, the topic, we put that in the top part of the hourglass, and it's kind of broad there, and we explore. We get curious about that topic, that issue, but we also ask questions about what's important about this to you? What's the significant aspect of it, and a lot of times in narrowing the topic, we're also getting to the part of it that resonates with the client and maybe becomes the coaching the person part of that topic, but it's a lot of exploration. It's a lot of curiosity that gets exercised there, and it's okay. That's exploring the topic, but I like to think of that topic as, there are a lot of different metaphors we could use here, an iceberg, we could think of the topic as the gateway into coaching the person, or sometimes I talk about the topic being a mirror by which the client sees him or herself and can see, "Oh. Here are some changes I need to make with me," and the problem is revealing that to the client. It's not that we truncate the problem off and give it no attention. It's the problem is there to serve coaching the person.

Brian: So, that first question, or not even the first question. That's too much pressure on the first question, but that first set of questions in the top part of the hourglass, which are going to expose more about the topic in order that we can maybe sense where an internal shift might occur. So, you wouldn't want to ask the luggage-packer, "How big is your suitcase?"

Chad: Yeah, no, that's a good distinction there. There are some bad questions.

Brian: Do you have access to a bigger suitcase?

Chad: Yeah. What size is the plane? Warm weather or cold weather? No, those aren't. By the way, that's the coaching the problem part that's really bad. It's really not even coaching, it's consulting. It's this idea of I, as the coach, need to gather some information so I can form a solution or at least somehow contribute to a solution to the person's problem. A lot of coaching is, how can I put this, we are helping the person solve their own problem, and honestly, Brian, that's good coaching. There's nothing wrong with that, and there are times when that also leads to not only do they come up with a solution to their problem, but they make an internal shift that helps them grow, and develop, and create new resources within themselves not only for this problem, but for lots of other problems, or lots of other areas of life. So, like with the suitcase topic, that's why we don't want to go into consultant mode of gathering a bunch of data about the size of the suitcase, and what color is it? Have you ever sat on the suitcase to try to pack more in there?

Brian: What if you had a blue suitcase?

Chad: Yeah. That'd help a lot. Then you'd be that guy with the blue suitcase. Just explore what's important about this to you, and what's got this on your mind? If you knew how to pack perfectly, what would that change in your life? If you just totally blew it on one trip, what would be the consequences? Those kind of exploratory questions, they do explore the issue, but in exploring the issue more deeply, we may or may not get to this place where we see, oh, here's something that actually needs to shift within the client.

Brian: You asked some good questions there. I think as you and I mentor coaches, this is where they

struggle, with this question that asks not so much about the problem in a specific way so we can solve the problem, but also not suggesting an agenda, such as, what has you worried about packing for this trip? As soon as I say “worried,” I’m suggesting a problem.

Chad: It’s interesting because we do want to use language that has some color and some bite to it, but we don’t want to do it in a way that’s over suggestive and kind of leading. If the client didn’t say they were anxious, then introducing the word anxious, or anxiety, or fear.

Brian: Absolutely. That’s a huge mistake. It may be that. I definitely remember being coached by a beginner coach, and it was about exercising during the winter, and I was talking about running, maybe running outside during the winter, and the coach’s question was, “Why are you so afraid to run in the cold?”

Chad: I didn’t say I was, thank you.

Brian: I remember everything in me going, “Uh. Okay.”

Chad: Can I hang up now and be finished?

Brian: Yeah. That didn’t work very well for me. So, you asked a few questions, but Chad, you just spit them right out so easily. What are some of the keys to asking those questions? Go back through some of those questions that you asked.

Chad: I don’t even remember what I asked now, and gosh, I don’t want to sound too technical, like I’m super intentional about this because I’m not, but I think it’s probably that I’m curious about the intersection between this issue and the person. I’m looking for what’s the impact, what’s the concern, what’s interesting about this topic not only from my perspective as the coach, but more from the client’s perspective, so that tends to keep me from asking a lot of questions about the past. What happened on your last trip that went badly? That kind of thing. It tends to get me more thinking about the present, into the future. It gets me thinking about this person’s interaction with the issue, and I tend to think those kind of, what do you call it? Maybe parameters or something, leads to really good questions.

Brian: Now, that topic that I gave you did not have a lot of emotion tied into it. It was hard to say, here’s the problem. Here’s the feelings, here’s what’s going on, here’s the context, but so many of our clients come to us with a real struggle, with a real urgency, with a real frustration, and you’re probably hearing that frustration right off the bat. So, maybe you’ve got a topic, and you’re also exposed to some context you’re seeing that’s causing you problems. Does that change the way you look at that intersection?

Chad: Yeah, I think sometimes... There’s always an emotional aspect to every topic. Sometimes the emotional inner world of the client is more exposed, and other times it’s not as exposed. It’s interesting because I don’t the exposed emotion is always the best indicator as to what part of this is coach the person material. I tend to think we are coaching the person when we are helping the person make an internal change. So, they’re changing something about their perspective, their attitude, their belief, their outlook, deeply held beliefs, those kinds of things. Emotions just give us kind of data as to what’s going on, but they rarely are the part that needs to be changed.

Brian: I recently had a client who was concerned about upcoming changes, wondering if they were even going to be able to function after these changes. You could feel... I don’t want to put words, but I would

say I'm hearing anxiety, not just fear, but maybe beyond that, concern not just about themselves but about the organization, and being able to jump ahead and know what the conclusions were was a definite mindset shift. I mean, there had to be one. I mean, for me, I can just affirm that these changes are going to self-destruct the organization. That's my conclusion. It's not. It's got to be a mindset shift of some sort.

Chad: Say more about that. So, a mindset shift for the client.

Brian: Yeah, and I think I probably even made a direct statement at one point that, "You're saying if we keep doing things like we are, we're going to keep getting the results we got." So, when that's the case, you've got to do something different.

Chad: What's the different? I think it's interesting, a lot of times the client is looking. First of all, they're looking for things to be different, and then they're looking for, "What can I do different so things are different, but deeper than that, they have to say, "What needs to change about me so that I do things different so that the things are different?" To me, that's just the layers that we peel back for our clients, and I think it's why we emphasize the not the problem piece because you are going to solve the problem, and a deeper reality is you are going to change. There is something about you that's going to change, and that's going to change your behaviors. It's also going to change your outcomes, and all of that kind of flows forward from there, but not every topic requires the person to change. I think that's where we could get in trouble. We always want to explore that. We always want to ask about it. We want to see if there's an aspect of this that requires the client to change, and we're not doing very good coaching if we're not. Let me put that differently. We're not doing great coaching if we're not exploring those internal shifts, the possibility of them, but if we force internal shifts, I don't think we're doing great coaching either because some things don't require a deep, personal change.

Brian: Let's talk about that pivot point where you feel like something's come up. You've uncovered some awareness that there are some internal issues, maybe you've identified some values or beliefs that go along with this. How do you take those clues and then move forward into the coaching without you setting the agenda based on what you think the problem is in these beliefs or values?

Chad: Yeah, that's great. I usually am asking questions like, "So, what do you need in order to handle this?" Gosh, I hate to use the suitcase packing because I'm not sure where that conversation might go, but let's just say they decided, "What really would help me with packing my suitcase is if I could pack fewer things but still feel good about being prepared." That's the pinch point, you know. I'm just making this up. I don't know if this is what actually happened, and then, you might begin to explore, "When you say pack lightly, what would that mean? What would too light mean?" You do all that exploration, and maybe they get to this place where they say, "The thing I would really have to give up is the idea that I'm going to be prepared for anything." Now, we're at something where I don't know what the internal shift is. I don't know what it's going to require, but here's a place where we're now exploring not what's in the suitcase, but what's in the client.

Brian: Not what's in the suitcase, but what's in the client.

Chad: I should have gone into marketing, right? You can imagine, that's a pretty powerful thing for someone to say I have to give up this value that I have, that being a well-packed, world-traveler means I'm prepared for anything. That sounds like such a subtle shift, but notice, all of that's internal. For the [Transcribed by Alyssa Miller](#)

person to say, "I've got to go from believing I need to be prepared for anything to I need to be prepared for most things, or the most common things, or whatever, and it's okay if something surprises me." Then you explore what would it take. What would it take for you to be okay with that?

Brian: That pivot point, in the hourglass, I call that the pinch right there. I think the confusion we get is when the client shares the topic with us, such as, "I want to pack this bag," I take that as a general idea of what the topic might be. Not that I'm going to change it, but that I'm going to hold that for now, that's the general topic, but when I get to the pinch, if I remember right, this is what I did. I said, "Not that we've discussed this a little bit, what do you want to walk away with when we finish this coaching?" He was able to say, in this case, he said, "I want to have confidence. On the plane. I want to get on the plane with confidence." That, for me, did not say okay, we're not talking about the bag anymore. We're talking about confidence. I think that's what you're saying. I don't want to throw the baggage out with the bathwater, right? So, I've got to keep the baggage in the conversation, but now, added to that, is this idea of confidence.

Chad: It's a both-and. The problem is still there, and we want a solution for it. We want to be able to move forward on it, and almost like a bonus...

Brian: And the client identified it. I did not.

Chad: That's right. The confidence is something they identified. By the way, if the client doesn't identify something specific about them or some kind of internal thing, we ask about those things. We have questions where we can say, "What needs to change inside of you so that you can handle this well, or what does this problem require of you that you don't have yet?" Another one, and this really is where it goes from the problem to the person big time is when the client's able to make those internal shifts, and we can help them imagine where else in their life those internal shifts will be really helpful and find application. Because now they haven't created a resource just for this problem, now they have a new resource internally that allows them to show up in a more powerful, appropriate way in lots of areas of life.

Brian: I would think that could show up a lot of places in the coaching. That could show up just in the discovery of what actions to take, so you could think about it from a different angle of how this would apply to a different situation, not losing the topic, but stepping away from it just for a second just to get some perspective.

Chad: That's right, and I like to think the client's walking away very happy because not only do they have a solution for this issue, but they've recognized something about themselves that's going to have much broader application, even more useful, but not in a way that ignores the topic at hand. I say that, and if we can just go on a quick caveat, most of the time, at least in my coaching, that's the way it unfolds. There's a topic. What's your goal for your topic? It's this. Great. We explore that topic. Along the way, we find the client would benefit from making some internal shifts that would allow him or her to address this topic more successfully, and those are resources they can also apply in other areas of life. We design actions. Ba-da-boom. Ba-da-bing. Topic over. Session over. Other sessions, though, what's your topic? It's this. What's success look like? I want to get here in the session. Great. We coach on that, and then we recognize that the internal shift needed is so either significant or a big part of this person's life that that actually does become the topic. We almost forget about the thing they said they wanted

out of this topic, or out of this session, but that's their choice. We're not making the choice for them, but sometimes, there's that presenting problem really is the surface manifestation of something much deeper, and that's what they really want to talk about. Maybe they just didn't know that that's what they wanted to talk about, or didn't know how to present it, or whatever.

Brian: So, in your book, you talk about using the problem as a mirror to look even deeper into this.

Chad: Yeah, I think the things that we want to get coached on almost always reveal something about ourselves as clients that we would like to be different. It could be something minor, and I think that's what throws some coaches off is they think every internal shift has to be, "Give your life to Jesus," and no. A lot of times, the internal shift is something that's kind of subtle. I was going to say, "I don't always have to be right." That's not that subtle really. That's pretty significant too, but it could be something subtle like, "I'm going to be more flexible," or, "It's okay to speak the truth," or, "The alarm clock is my friend." I remember coaching a client a few years ago, and that was the internal shift he made. It was, "The alarm clock is my friend." You think, that sounds kind of petty almost. Except, every morning, you have a response to your alarm clock.

Brian: Absolutely. It sets the tone for the day. It sets your mood.

Chad: That's right, and it set for him whether he was going to be a friend back to the alarm clock and get up. It really affected his whole day. It was really a very minor internal shift that paid off greatly, kind of a mustard seed thing.

Brian: I think that's a great example because I think typically, get your butt up is what most people are thinking. Get over it. Get on with your day. Nobody wants to get up. We just turn into that judgmental, barking. It's just so easy to come out of us one way or another, but to reflect it, to use it as a mirror so they can really see what's going on, it's amazing how easy it is to move past that in a really helpful, positive way.

Chad: That's right, and imagine if you coach that topic looking only for external changes. I'm going to get a nicer alarm clock. I'm going to get a clock that slowly turns the lights on, whatever. I'm going to change all the stuff out there.

Brian: Which maybe happens in coaching.

Chad: It could. It certainly could, but just notice the distinction between external changes and then internal change. As coaches, we just want to be open to those internal changes, want to explore them. They are very high leverage.

Brian: Chad, I appreciate you joining me and talking about this great topic of coach the person, not the problem. Really appreciate your insights on this. We're going to have to continue this conversation in another podcast, another day.

Chad: It was fun being with you today, Brian.

Brian: Thanks so much for everyone joining us. Don't miss any of our podcasts. Subscribe to our podcast at iTunes, or at Overcast, or at Stitcher, or Google Play by searching for Coach Approach Ministries Podcast. We'll see you next week.

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